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Joint Inspection Unit

Strategic planning in the United Nations system

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly his comments and those of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Strategic planning in the United Nations system" (JIU/REP/2012/12).

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Summary

In its report entitled "Strategic planning in the United Nations system", the Joint Inspection Unit provides an overview of the current practices in place for strategic planning throughout the United Nations system and proposes approaches that seek to create a more unified and consistent strategic planning process.

The present note provides the views of organizations of the United Nations system on the recommendations made in the report. They have been consolidated on the basis of input from member organizations of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, which welcomed the report and supported some of its conclusions.

I. Introduction

1. In its report entitled "Strategic planning in the United Nations system", the Joint Inspection Unit provided an overview of the current practices in place for strategic planning across the United Nations system and proposes approaches that seek to create a more unified and consistent strategic planning process. The Unit identifies emerging practices, noting progress made towards consistency in the strategic planning process within the operational activities for development following the adoption of the comprehensive policy reviews in 2008 and 2012. In addition, it finds that agency strategies are increasingly defined through the use of results-based management practices, a linkage that the Unit supports, although it notes that strategic plans should be driven by mandates, not by budgetary considerations.

II. General comments

2. Organizations of the United Nations system welcome the report and the Joint Inspection Unit's effort to harmonize the strategic planning process in order to help bring about greater synergy and coherence among United Nations system development actors. Organizations find the report beneficial and appreciate the useful information it contains on experiences in strategic planning in the United Nations system and generally agree that there is a need for broader consultation among all stakeholders.

3. Organizations note that the recommendations contained in the report apply mostly, although not exclusively, to United Nations system organizations that participate in the quadrennial comprehensive policy review and, in this context, recognize the benefits of having harmonized planning cycles, establishing common goals for strategic planning, using common terminology and developing coherent, system-wide sectoral strategic frameworks. They note that if better harmonization on strategic planning is achieved among United Nations agencies, as is promoted in the report, a system-wide action plan could emerge that links programmatic areas such as child nutrition, climate change and maternal health, among others across agencies.

4. Outside of the development planning process, however, several entities, in particular specialized agencies, found the recommendations contained in the report more difficult to apply, citing the unique nature of their mandates and the strong linkage between their planning and governing body processes.

5. While generally supportive of the report and the recommendations therein, organizations note several areas where the report could have been strengthened. From the perspective of an operational agency, the report would have benefited from more discussion of strategic planning at the country level rather than addressing only high-level, Headquarters-focused practices. For example, in addition to dealing with the challenges associated with voluntary funding, the report would have benefited from more references to development activities and the challenges faced by agencies as they work to link their strategic planning cycles to national priorities and country programme developments, which are aligned with national planning cycles. As a result, the conclusions and recommendations are more geared towards a

regular, normative planning process and are of limited value for some development-focused agencies.

6. In addition, organizations suggest they would have benefited from a more in-depth analysis of the process aspects of strategic planning. The process of developing a strategic plan can be extremely important for an organization if it is developed in a participatory, stakeholder-driven manner. Conversely, a poorly managed process can negatively affect staff relations, undermine morale and create considerable confusion and inefficiencies. In this vein, organizations expressed a desire to further discuss the operationalization of strategic plans and how implementation can be measured.

7. Finally, organizations expressed a desire for additional discussion of the relationship between strategic planning and resource considerations, including the adjustment of expected results based on resource forecasting and analysis by strategic objective or goal. Linking resourcing with strategic planning helps to manage the expectations not only of staff striving to achieve objectives but also of national Governments supported by the organizations' operations. Organizations remain concerned about the cost of implementing coordination measures in general, noting that coordination has value but also a cost, and suggest that the report could have dealt on both aspects (in other words, the value derived from the measures and the cost of their implementation).

III. Specific comments on recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Secretary-General, in his capacity as Chair of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), drawing upon the support of the United Nations Strategic Planning Network and/or a CEB ad hoc task force, should review with the executive heads the respective strategic plans of their organizations with a view to defining a coherent overarching framework and common goals for strategic planning to ensure consistency and avoid the overlap of activities across the United Nations system.

8. In responding to recommendation 1, organizations support the concept of defining a coherent overarching framework and common goals for strategic planning but express concern regarding the mechanism suggested to achieve this goal, suggesting that neither the United Nations Strategic Planning Network nor CEB are the most appropriate enablers of its implementation.

9. Organizations note that the United Nations Strategic Planning Network functions as an unstructured, informal mechanism and is therefore unsuitable, in its current form, for achieving the stated goal. They also note that, in its report, the Joint Inspection Unit places emphasis on the knowledge-sharing functions of the Network and that part of the value of the Network is the fact that it enables ideas to be shared and discussed because its members meet as part of a forum rather than as representatives of the positions of their respective agencies on specific issues. Any future structural change to the Network that would, for example, enhance its capacity to regularly include strategic planning into high-level formalized bodies, especially CEB, would also need to enable the Network to retain its existing high level of flexibility, which was recognized by the Unit in its report.

10. Organizations note that while an ad hoc inter-agency mechanism might fulfil the objectives of the recommendation, creating an overarching, system-wide framework that includes common goals for strategic planning is not a simple task, especially since each agency's overarching framework and strategic goals come from their governing bodies. Implementation of the recommendation could not, therefore, be achieved through inter-agency consultations alone and would probably require the involvement of legislative bodies throughout the process.

11. Nevertheless, many organizations note that the recent resolution on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review (General Assembly resolution 67/226) has several important recommendations on various aspects of strategic planning, both for the funds and programmes and for the United Nations development system as a whole. It is likely that as a follow-up to the resolution, the United Nations will develop an appropriate mechanism to implement these recommendations. Simply integrating guidance related to the quadrennial comprehensive policy review into the strategic planning frameworks of United Nations entities would go a long way to creating coherence and ensuring consistency, at least for those agencies to which the review applies.

Recommendation 2

The Secretary-General should, in consultation with the Committee for Programme and Coordination, the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions and relevant General Assembly committees, prepare and submit for approval to the General Assembly an updated draft Secretary-General's bulletin to replace ST/SGB/2000/8 so as to adequately reflect results-based management and the Organization's long-term goals in the definition of, and in the responsibilities of all parties to, the programme planning process, the programme aspects of the budget, the monitoring of implementation and the methods of evaluation.

12. Organizations share the concerns of the Joint Inspection Unit regarding the rigidity of the current approval process for the United Nations strategic framework and the resulting difficulties in employing the results-based management approach. They therefore strongly support this recommendation, while noting that it calls for an update to the United Nations strategic framework mechanism, which is not a system-wide strategic planning tool and would therefore not apply to the specialized agencies or to other agencies. In particular, organizations point to the importance of integrating results-based management into the strategic planning mechanisms and note that the General Assembly, in its resolution 67/226, paragraphs 164-172, on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review, provides guidance and frames expectations for Member States in this respect. Any update to the Secretary-General's bulletin should therefore ensure coherence and complementarity with such resolutions. Furthermore, organizations suggest that the United Nations Evaluation Group may be able to provide valuable input in defining quality and standards for evaluation. Finally, organizations suggest that the draft bulletin should be developed in conjunction with activities associated with implementing recommendation 3.

Recommendation 3

The executive heads of organizations of the United Nations system, through the existing inter-agency coordination mechanism of CEB, including

the High-level Committee on Management, the High-level Committee on Programmes and the United Nations Development Group, should define and agree on a commonly accepted terminology for strategic planning and report thereon to their legislative bodies and the Economic and Social Council in order to establish a basis for comparison and facilitate aggregation in planning, monitoring, evaluating and reporting on the implementation of the strategic plans of their respective organizations.

13. In general, organizations support recommendation 3 and agree with the aim of working towards the development of a shared language for strategic planning documents, which should help stakeholders to understand such plans more easily. Some organizations note that the terminology used in their strategic plans results from interactions between their secretariats and Member States and defines concepts relevant to their specific mandates, and therefore is not entirely relevant for general usage across the system.

14. Organizations also note that the use of specialist terminology may require governing and legislative bodies such as the Economic and Social Council, executive boards and the Committee for Programme and Coordination, together with the executive heads of organizations of the United Nations system, to be involved in the process of developing a commonly accepted terminology for strategic planning.

15. They note that, in this recommendation, the Joint Inspection Unit also suggests that an agreed terminology would facilitate the aggregation in planning, monitoring, evaluating and reporting, and suggest that this is an ambitious undertaking that requires much further deliberation and that raises a number of practical difficulties, including for the entity or entities responsible for completing the aggregation and accountable for the content of such documents.

Recommendation 4

The legislative bodies of the organizations of the United Nations system should formulate and define relevant system-wide sectoral strategic frameworks through the Economic and Social Council to address the long-term goals established by the 2005 World Summit Outcome, adopted by the General Assembly in resolution 60/1, as well as those established by the missions and mandates of the system's organizations as a result of global conferences.

16. Organizations of the United Nations system, noting that recommendation 4 was directed at legislative bodies, acknowledge the importance of improving coordination and coherence among agencies and agree that the system should avoid multiplication of results frameworks and reporting requirements. They note that, albeit in a limited way, the establishment of sectoral strategies across the mandates of United Nations agencies already takes place, citing UN-Oceans as one example.

17. Nevertheless, organizations express several concerns regarding the added value of having an additional layer of system-wide sectoral strategic frameworks. They raised several practical issues, including the need for the individual mandates of the agencies to be respected while these frameworks are developed, suggesting that in order for this to happen there would also need to be a consistent approach by Member States in each relevant organization, which would in turn require consistency in the negotiations within the Economic and Social Council. In addition, organizations expressed concern that the costs associated with preparing and

operationalizing such frameworks (including for their monitoring and evaluation) would outweigh any benefits that they might bring and noted that the report would have benefited from a solid analysis in support of the recommendation.

18. Furthermore, several organizations, notably the specialized agencies, indicated that the lack of a structural link between their legislative bodies and the Economic and Social Council may inhibit full implementation of the recommendation, further noting that while the organizations found the guidance and lessons from other parts of the United Nations system valuable, their member States established their strategic frameworks through their own legislative processes.

Recommendation 5

The legislative bodies of the organizations of the United Nations system should instruct their respective secretariats to adopt the necessary measures by the end of 2015 to harmonize and/or align the planning cycles of their strategic plans so that all the organizations are ready to start a new harmonized reporting cycle to Member States in 2016.

19. Noting that recommendation 5 is directed at legislative bodies, organizations generally support its essential message of the value of system-wide harmonized/aligned strategic planning cycles, particularly if they are aligned with the quadrennial comprehensive policy review. Organizations note with appreciation that in its report the Joint Inspection Unit recognized that many of them had already agreed to align their planning cycles beginning in 2014. However, they also note that the reporting timelines and requirements remain a challenge, particularly for agencies that rely on extrabudgetary funds and are expected to report to Member States individually on the use of these funds. Organizations suggest that legislative bodies could go further by deciding on common reporting requirements for their members regarding extrabudgetary as well as regular budget funds.

20. Some organizations indicate that their existing planning cycles cover a broader period of time than is indicated in the recommendation and that they are therefore not in a position to join a harmonized cycle. For example, one agency has a six-year planning cycle that runs from 2012 to 2017 while another has a cycle that runs from 2014 to 2019. Neither of these specialized agencies would be in a position to modify planning cycles prior to the completion of the existing ones. Furthermore, some agencies align their planning cycles with legislative body events (congresses, etc.) and would need to change the scheduling of these events.

21. In conclusion, organizations note that the alignment of strategic planning schedules would require Governments (and, in some cases, secretariats) to budget in one year all the resources needed to attend all meetings of United Nations agencies. This could present a challenge to many developing and least developed countries.